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ABSTRACT

This speech outlines what the adolescent should know about the physical, social and emotional needs and development of young children from birth to six years. Topics suggested for presentation to high school students include understanding and coping with physiological processes, providing a safe and stimulating environment, and understanding and directing the development of the young child both as an individual, and as a member of a larger social group. The importance of teaching this subject area to high school students is defined by their need to understand these processes. (ED)

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UNDERSTANDING SOME OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

by
Keturah E. Whitehurst

Introduction

The purpose of these discussion groups is to give the teachers of high school students some facts, principles, and understandings that high school students should learn about the growth and development of children from birth to six years. These are the years when the children, except those who are fortunate enough to go to nursery school, are family-centered rather than school-centered. It is the time when the developmental needs of children are met chiefly by parents, siblings, and other figures within the family circle. The high school students are the older siblings of the children we are especially interested in understanding for this session. Perhaps they are the baby-sitters for children who are unrelated to them. Many of these students may even, themselves, be parents when their classmates are away in college. No matter in which category our high school students find themselves, they will find it rewarding to have some understanding of the developmental needs of young children.

Recognizing the fact that high school students have not neither the academic or experiental background which

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would prepare them to understand all the branches of science from which the principles of development are derived, we should teach them in the language they can understand, using simple rather than complex concepts. It seems appropriate to teach the developmental needs of young children to high school students under two general headings: (1) physical needs and (2) social-emotional needs. Therefore, we shall proceed to talk about child care techniques and meeting the emotional needs of young children.

Ethel B. Waring has described the goal of all developmental trends as being the development of a happy and mature person. To develop as a mature person is to develop as an active, growing person; a family person yet an individual; a secure and affectionate person behaving in ways appropriate to his or her sex; a creative and a thinking person - one who can communicate effectively; a self-controlled, law-abiding, socially acceptable person - adequate, self-directing, and responsible; a dependable and spiritual person. Everyone who cares for the growing child promotes or hinders his development. It is, therefore, highly important that adolescents understand how the child grows and develops and how he (the adolescent) can influence and guide the developmental process.

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WHAT THE ADOLESCENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

THE PHYSICAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN

At birth, the infant must establish himself as an independent organism, capable of eating, breathing, and eliminating for himself. The achievement of regularity and efficiency in these physiological processes is not easy and the newborn needs patient understanding of its individual rhythmical needs. His body temperature must adjust to the variable temperature of the extra uterine environment and he requires warmer clothing than he will later need. Sights and sounds activating the senses much in the manner described by William James as "buzzing, booming confusion" will later give way to meaningful response to the objects of the environment. It will not be long before the squirming, helpless, uncoordinated neonate will become the active, striving infant, grasping and holding and exploring with the mouth whatever objects are within his reach. Because his mouth is the gateway through which the infant understands his world, we remove from him the hazards of swallowing small objects and harmful substances. We provide for him the physical security of our protective vigilance while extending to him the freedom to explore and find out the nature of things through his own activity.

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If we observe carefully the rhythms of motor activities of the infant, we can learn a great deal about his physiological needs. For example, we find him more active just before his feeding time than just after. Or, he is more active when he is wet or soiled than when he is comfortably dry and clean. When he has grown older and the world and its people have become more interesting, he may resort to excessively more activity in his efforts to delay succumbing to the physiological demands of sleep.

Lest we, too, get caught up in the enthusiasm of a healthy young child's spontaneous and continuous activity, we must constantly remind ourselves of his need for proportionately long hours of sleep and must hold fast to the discipline of consistency and regularity. Too little sleep leads to nervousness, thumb-sucking, crying, irritability and non-compliant behavior. Neither shopping tours nor exhibitions of "precocious" behavior to visiting friends should be allowed unduly to delay the bedtime hour. Of course, as the child grows older, his body needs fewer hours of sleep. By the time he is six he is able to enjoy a full day at school with, perhaps, a short mid-morning and/or after-lunch nap.

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These facts of child care can be easily understood by the high school student. He can also understand the necessity of adequate nutrition and regular medical check-ups. Thanks to the effective methods of the Public Health Service, everybody knows about the beneficial effects of orange juice, milk, and cod liver oil in the diets of growing children, but certain forms of vitamin deficiencies that are not corrected by these foods may require the attention of a physician. The physician is also able to discover and correct glandular malfunctioning (if present) before the child suffers adverse effects. Frequent medical check-ups are, therefore, essential to healthy physical growth. They should be frequent in babyhood and less so in early childhood because growth is rapid in babyhood and systems are frequently out of kilter; but in early childhood, growth tends to be on an even keel.

Not only does the child need to visit his pediatrician, but also he needs to visit his dentist. The notion that care of the first teeth is unnecessary because the child will be getting a new set anyway is false. Both dental caries and childhood diseases are serious and both can have deleterious consequences upon the future health of the child.

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There are many other physical needs that can be pointed out to adolescents but our time indicates that we should move on to the social and emotional needs that are more subtle in their nature and which may easily be overlooked by the adolescent as being unimportant, self-evident, or even ridiculous. However, students of child development have found them to be crucial in the early childhood period of development.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

The first and most vital need of the young child is to have his dependency needs met with affectionate consideration and care. Then he is free and willing to move on toward emotional independence. But he must first enjoy the security of being loved, fed, comforted and esteemed. Since the baby's frustration tolerance is known to be low because of his immaturity, immediate attention to his cries gives him the assurance that his distress will be alleviated and plants the seeds of optimism and trust. Not to heed his cries is to undermine his security and create anxiety, distrust, and hopelessness. The child's first object of love and trust is the person who cares for him - mother, sister, or baby-sitter. It is

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the duty of this person to supply such a degree of social and emotional security that he will risk the frustrations of growing up with a reasonable expectation of success. He also has the need to become an independent person. As age increases he will make fewer "selfish" demands upon fewer people and will develop the ability to share, to sympathize, and to cooperate.

Evidence that the child is fulfilling his need for independence can be seen in the fact that self-feeding and self-dressing skills begun in babyhood have reached a high level of efficiency in early childhood. Barring serious distractions, he can now feed himself without spilling and he can dress himself though he is painfully slow. Small buttons may be unmanageable but large ones do not give too much trouble. He can brush his hair and has developed some bathing skills. These accomplishments in self-care are to be encouraged for they are a source of pride for both the child and his parents and they represent a significant step in the child's need to become a contributing and cooperating member of the family group. Although he misses a couple of ears in bathing, his gains in self-confidence and sense of mastery far outweigh the errors of his immaturity. Do not rob the

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child of the learning experience he robs in botching a job simply because you (the adult) can do it better and more quickly. He needs the opportunity to learn by doing. When a child has learned reasonably well how to dress, feed, and toilet himself he is ready to take his place among a group of children and to enter upon the trials and excitement of peer group living. He is on his way toward independence and social responsibility.

Within the group he learns to accept restrictions upon his personal desires. He learns that sex-roles are different and that he must identify with the role of his own sex or suffer the consequence of group censure. He learns to initiate ideas and to defend himself. His motor skills serve him well in making him acceptable to the group. Even at very early ages leadership traits emerge which give the careful observer some indication of the future role of the child among his peers. The group which he enters timidly in early childhood is destined to challenge the family in late childhood in its bid for the loyalty of the child. Children sometimes need help in developing the motor and social skills that will make them acceptable group members. Despite his need for friends, the child often experiences jealousies and hostilities that alienate his friends. At these times

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he needs the guiding hand of an understanding adult who will help him to develop self-control and to use his thought processes in facing and solving the conflicts of realistic living.

Children communicate in many languages. The language of impulse and emotion, characteristic of babyhood, gives way to the language of play and the spoken word of early childhood but the nonverbal language of feeling is never really forgotten. Children continue to speak to us and we to them in this primordial form of communication. Moreover, their drawings, their paintings, their stories and other forms of their creative art tell us more about their joys and sorrows than they can express in spoken words. Play and art, then, should never be thought of as "a useless waste of time." These expressions of the child's imagination often meet his need to practice in phantasy the newly found social skills and understandings of the adult world.

Now that the normally developing child has, in his babyhood, succeeded in distinguishing between "you" and "me" and in early childhood between "thine" and "mine," he needs the re-inforcement of others' respect for his individuality for his property rights. What is frequently described as willful,stubborn, or negativistic behavior is merely the child's assertion of his need to be

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an individual climate [illegible],

diabolical scheme [illegible]

utter desperation.

By the same token, the child is not an irresponsible liar because, in early childhood, he sometimes finds it difficult to differentiate between what is true and what is not - between what is fancy and what is fact. If, with the maturity of our own perceptual experiences, we sometimes see what is not there or in good faith we misinterpret what we see or hear, how much more vulnerable is the young child to the misperceptions of immature thought processes and inadequately developed concepts! What he needs is encouragement in the use of his imaginative powers coupled with training in the acts of close observation and discrimination. Accepting the young child's lapses from accurate perceptual responses is not the same as indulging him in falsifications. Rather, it is recognizing with sympathetic understanding the child's immaturity and spontaneity at the same time that we guide him toward greater accuracy through correction of his errors. The child must learn to discriminate. This is a recurrent developmental task.

The young child needs permissiveness but he also needs discipline. He needs social and emotional "space" in which to grow - an appropriate amount of latitude, but he

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needs the security of consistency, order, limitations, and regularity which constitute the essence of true discipline. An undisciplined child is unorganized, unsure, and unhappy. Punishment and discipline are not the same. Punishment looks backward to even the score against an act committed in the past, while discipline looks forward preparing the individual for wise choices in the future.

Finally, the young child needs a model - one of like sex according to whose behavior he can pattern his own development. He will experience a succession of models before he reaches maturity but the earliest models are found among persons who are closest to him - members of his immediate family are the most significant persons in his life. The young boy imitates his father, the young girl, her mother. By so doing, each learns his appropriate sex role - how to act in masculine or feminine ways, but more significantly, how to feel and appreciate masculine or feminine values.

For an adolescent high school student, the development of an individual from a self-centered, dependent neonate to a social-minded, responsible person can be a gripping and fascinating story when its facts and principles are presented to them in a simple and useful way. Opportunities

to be with children and to observe the wondrous unfoldment of their development may kindle within them sparks of sympathy and understanding which they had not dreamed were in their possession. Thus, the family and the nation are strengthened by a new generation's having a better understanding of homemaking and child care.

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